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ABSTRACT

A partnership between a class for preservice elementary teachers in the university and an elementary class in the public schools goes a long way to breaking down the cycle of blame, whereby parents and teachers on all levels blame each other for the poor quality of education offered to students. A small program at Brigham Young University (Utah) requiring university students and Provo, Utah elementary children to exchange personal letters with each other, for instance, allows preservice teachers to experience first-hand the type of writing that they will have to work with later on the job. The experience of exchanging letters helps these preservice teachers to develop practical theories about how to teach writing to elementary school students. Furthermore, from the standpoint of the elementary student, writing letters to an adult is exciting and emotionally fulfilling; it also provides the experience of writing for a real audience. A university-school partnership can also involve panel discussions with elementary school teachers, through which preservice teachers may gain a realistic view of teaching. Finally, preservice teachers enrolled in writing classes may discover practical topics for research papers through their communication with elementary school teachers. By researching topics suggested by professionals on the job, preservice teachers have a sense of writing for an audience and researching a subject of importance. (TB)

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Breaking the Blame Cycle: A Small Partnership Between Preservice Writing Teachers and Elementary Classrooms

by
Elizabeth Finch Hedengren

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Abstract

Breaking the Blame Cycle:
A Small Partnership Between Preservice Writing Teachers and Elementary Classrooms
by Elizabeth Finch Hedengren

A small partnership between composition classes of pre-service elementary teachers and elementary classrooms provides valuable experience for the pre-service teachers while giving children individualized attention. Pen pal letters between children and students provide a real audience for writing. A panel discussion featuring the cooperating classroom teachers gives the students a realistic view of teaching. Even the traditional research assignment becomes more meaningful when the classroom teachers suggest topics that they would like to know more about.

Breaking the Blame Cycle:
A Small Partnership Between Preservice Writing Teachers and Elementary Classrooms

The blame cycle is familiar to us all. Despairing over poorly prepared students, university teachers blame high school teachers, who blame elementary teachers, who blame parents, who, no doubt, blame the entire educational system. But we are not likely to improve education until we stop blaming and start cooperating. We are, after all, a team.

The idea of school/university partnerships is hardly new. In *Tomorrow's Teachers,* a consortium of Deans of Education suggests developing "Professional Development Schools" to serve as research laboratories for universities (Holmes Group). John I. Goodlad has been a particular advocate of this kind of partnership; through his influence many school/university partnerships have developed (see Goodlad; Maeroff; Jones and Maloy; Sirotnik and Goodlad; Gross; Armbruster, Anderson, and Mall). With Goodlad's help, the BYU-Public School partnership was formed in April 1984 to improve preservice and inservice training, curriculum development and research (see Harris, and Williams). This partnership between BYU and four local school districts has been mutually beneficial. Education students offer volunteer support; professors offer expertise; schools offer training grounds and opportunities for research (see Harris, and Williams).

However, these mammoth, formal partnerships can be unwieldy. At a 1989 BYU lecture Erika Lindeman suggested that the best way to improve

the quality of the educational system is to ask, "What can I do?" In response to that question, small, more informal partnerships may be created. Nancy Roser, Valerie Washington and Mary Louise Gomez all detail small teacher-to-teacher partnerships that have benefited both university and the public school participants. Kathy Danielson and Jan La Bonty as well as Joan Rankin have used penpal exchanges between university preservice teachers and public school students.

In the next few minutes, I want to share my experience with a small informal partnership, in the hope that you will also search for simple ways to break the blame cycle, and start cooperating.

The English 313-Grandview School Partnership

I began to search for ways to partner with public schools in 1991, while participating in the restructuring of Provo's Grandview Elementary School. As a parent I heard the needs of teachers for more support in the classroom; as a teacher of preservice writing teachers I knew the needs of my students for more practical experience. The possibilities for symbiosis were clear.

I prepared a proposal for the principal and my department head, detailing a program that I hoped would give the preservice teachers in my classrooms a taste of what "real" world teaching involves and at the same time provide individualized feedback and support of children's writing. My program relies on no funding, except my department supplies a small thank-you gift to the elementary school teachers. Working directly with the

teachers of the partner classrooms, without formal connection with the BYU-Public School Partnership, I have now completed two years of the program..

Participants

My course, English 313, Expository Writing for Elementary Education Majors, fulfills the Advanced Writing General Education requirement for Elementary education majors. Within the course students learn to write research papers, resumes, and other professional kinds of reports, as in similar advanced writing courses offered at BYU. However, in this course, we also teach students how to teach writing, by studying current theories (see Graves; Calkins) and by modeling these techniques. Though the students see how effective process writing, cooperative learning and workshop techniques are for them, they sometimes wonder, "Sure, these methods work with us, in college, and the books **say** they work with children, but can they really work with eight-year-olds?"

Grandview Elementary is the partner school. My three sections of English 313 were teamed with three elementary school classrooms: Linda Nielsen's second grade; Rem Wiscombe's fourth grade; and Chris Wilcox's fifth grade. All the teachers are experienced, excellent teachers, committed to teaching writing effectively in their classrooms. These regular, non-resource classrooms each have about thirty students. The teachers have been frustrated by lack of time to respond individually to children's writing, and also by the lack of "real" audiences for their writing.

Cooperative Experiences

Our partnership includes many different activities.

Pen pal letters. The first week of the semester we assign "pen pals." One week the BYU students write to the children, the next week the children respond. The letters are handwritten, and are not graded or screened by either me or the classroom teachers. I collect the letters in a large manila envelope and carry them back and forth. We do check to be sure that every child has a letter before bringing the envelope to school, to minimize disappointment. This past year, the children included other pieces of their writing with their letters, to which the BYU students responded with encouraging comments. The penpal exchange is the center of our partnership.

Panel discussion. In support of the penpal exchange, the three cooperating teachers meet with the combined 313 classes to answer their questions about teaching writing. Though initially not thrilled about giving up an evening for a class assignment, the students listen intently as the teachers each take a few minutes to explain his or her general writing program, and then respond as a panel to student questions. Students ask: "How do you find time for writing conferences?" "How do you teach grammar and spelling?" "Did you enjoy writing when you were in school?" Some of the questions were not directly related to teaching writing, such as the heartfelt "Were you ever unsure about being able to become a good teacher?"

I worried that this experience would be more beneficial for us than for the teachers, but they insist they enjoy having a chance to share what they have learned. Even when teachers have student teachers to train, they seldom have a chance to share, formally, their philosophies of teaching. They feel this is a chance to make a difference. One of the most powerful moments of one evening was when Rem looked up at the more than eighty students in the lecture hall and said, "Whatever you do, be sure you go into teaching for the right reasons." My students talked about that all semester.

Observation. The panel was especially meaningful because the students are able to observe the writing classes once during the weeks before the panel. The students are responsible to get to the class on their own. While observing, they meet their pen pals, and often confer with the children about their writing.

After the observation, the 313 students write essays about how to teach writing, combining information from their observations, the panel, and their reading. Reality looms in these papers: the non-English speaker acting out in the classroom, the pen-pal who ended her letter "I know I'm a terrible writer," the perceived chaos of peer review sessions. The students read their texts looking for solutions from then on.

Research. Before my students choose their research topics I visit the Grandview Faculty Meeting and ask the teachers to brainstorm some topics they would like to see researched. They rapidly call out a long list. Though

not all the students choose topics from this list, it helps the students see that research is not an empty school assignment. They research to find answers to the teachers' questions. Andrea writes that the audience of teachers "gave [her] a stronger purpose in writing. I wasn't just writing to fulfill an assignment. I was writing to . . . inform someone in the teaching profession." We publish all our research papers as a book, which we present to the Grandview faculty for their information.

Results

The results of our partnership have been mostly positive.

Children. The children are excited to have grown-up penpals. Mothers tell me of the fun their children are having writing to a penpal. Rem Wiscombe maintains that "though [he] had difficulties getting the kids to write" at times, the penpal program "increased motivation." This excitement can be seen in the letters themselves, the carefully decorated envelopes [show them] and sticker-covered letters. Shelly says, "I love wrighting letters to you." Jackie exclaims, "I'm so, so, so glad your my pin pall." Jessi shyly comments, "Well, I like you and I hope you like me." One student colored a Christmas card for me at the end of the semester: "Mrs. Hedengren, Thank you for letting your students write to us."

Some children also showed improvement in writing. The children often pick up good writing techniques they see in their penpals' letters. One child began underlining book titles when he saw his penpal do it; Jordan at

first wrote "did you get my **letr**?" but after reading "letter" in the penpal's letter, he wrote, "I got your **letter**." Children became comfortable with letter writing format (date, heading, closing). Many children began to write more detailed letters as the semester progressed and they became more comfortable in writing to this obviously interested audience. "I went to Delta for my Thanksgiving vacation I had so much fun I went Jack rabit hunting My grampa lives on a ranch thats why I went Jack rabit hunting I shot a hand gun it Broke won of my nalse [nails?] but I dont care."

Some children continued to be frustrated with writing, and some did not write each time. Some letters were short, formulaic, or illegible.

Preservice teachers

The BYU students, though, were also excited to get mail. When I passed out the envelopes, I had to allow time for the letter opening, the squeals, the sharing ("Look at this drawing! Listen to this!"). Jennifer writes, "It just made my day when I got a pen pal letter." Melissa says "It's nice to get to know someone by letter for a change."

Another student suggests, "The pen pal letters gave me a good feel [for] the capabilities a second grader has." The students experienced first hand "invented spelling." As Marni explains, her penpal "simply spells words as they sound, and his spelling tells me how words sound to him." The letters give the text power; one student says, "Reading Calkins helped me learn about how children will write at different grade levels --but having the

pen pal letters has helped me to see [this]." Melissa was concerned that her second grade penpal kept forgetting things she had told him, but after comparing with other students and reading the text, she decided, "a second grade memory is not as well developed as an adult's." Some students had two pen pals, and were able to compare their levels of ability. Students were able to reflect on how they would teach students of differing abilities when they were in charge of their own classrooms. Even students with illegible penpal letters point out that theory came to life as they tried to think how to help such students. Kim remarks that the Calkins text is "no longer a text book, but a guide . . . to teaching."

The letters, the panel, the observation and the text inspire strong feelings about how to teach writing. When her penpal's letter arrived with misspelled words crossed out, the correct spelling written above in adult handwriting, Sherrida responded with anger. "I felt my correspondence with Jessica had been violated. I now feel even more strongly that students should be in charge of editing their own papers." Another student told of observing a group share in which the teacher (not one of our cooperating teachers) demonstrated little interest in the child's story. This student explained, "No one commented because no one knew what to say. The teacher never once encouraged students to listen, nor did he [model] how to give feedback. As T.J. read his story, children conversed with one another and the teacher stared out the window." I think this student will give her students enthusiastic attention in her own classroom.

Many students realized that each child has much to teach us. "Joshua has so many stories to tell, " Mieka writes. She wonders why he isn't willing to share them. "Perhaps he is concentrating too much on the technicalities of writing. . .perhaps I need to redesign my questioning strategies. . . . Maybe all he needs is encouragement and success in writing."

The program was not without flaws. One father called to complain about the mechanical errors in a BYU student's letters. (At which point I wondered if perhaps **I** should have been writing correct spellings above my students' letters!) The teachers sometimes had difficulty finding time for letter writing. My students also felt stressed at times, continuing a correspondence as they tried to complete a research paper and other demanding assignments. Just collecting and delivering the letters was challenging.

But overall the program has been successful. At the end of the semester, we celebrate with a party for the penpals. As the BYU students call out the names of their penpals, one by one children respond with excitement and wonder, "Ah, that's me!" Soon pairs are scattered around the classroom, sharing writing with each other, intently listening and talking. The children seem to treasure having a grown-up truly listen to them. As I was leaving one such party, some time after school had been dismissed, I saw a big 5th grade boy still hanging around the door, hoping for one last glimpse of his pen pal as she went to the parking lot.

Conclusion

Partnerships can be tricky. One spring I thought I would get the most out of my limited garden space by planting tomatoes and acorn squash together. By August the squash vines overwhelmed the tomato plants, climbing around and over them, shading the green fruit from the sun it needed.

College-school partnerships must be managed better than my garden. One member's needs must not end up overwhelming the other's. To be successful, a partnership must benefit both partners equally.

I have been encouraged by the results of our partnership. Many of the children seem to have become more comfortable with writing. The 313 students have had a real experience with children's writing, and know more about how the theory they study applies in the elementary classroom.

The fit seems to work. This partnership has been small, but maybe small is good. A colleague of mine, Kristine Hansen, has started a penpal program between her composition teaching method class and a resource high school classroom. Surely there are many other small ways to work with other teachers to improve education. Maybe we, as individual teachers, can look about us for such partnerships. If we do, maybe we can break the blame cycle and start helping one another.

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